

LIFE ESTEPÁRIAS - PORTUGAL

Project title: CONSERVATION OF GREAT BUSTARD, LITTLE BUSTARD AND LESSER KESTREL IN THE BAIXO ALENTEJO CEREAL STEPPES – LIFE07 NAT/P/000654

Project background

Project LIFE Estepárias (Conservation of the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*), Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) and Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) in the Baixo Alentejo cereal steppe) intends to promote the conservation of the Great Bustard, Little Bustard and Lesser Kestrel in their main areas of occurrence in Portugal, in a long-term conservation perspective. The three species targeted in this project are steppe birds in need of urgent conservation measures, highly vulnerable to the changes in farming practices which, in the recent past, caused the loss and fragmentation of their habitat. This is one of the main factors that contributed for the unfavourable conservation status that they have on National, European and Global levels.

However, the changes in agriculture are not the only threats these birds are facing. The threats to their conservation include afforestation of farming lands, abandonment of the rural environment, collision with power lines and fences, electrocution on power poles, fragmentation of the populations caused by fencing and roads, disturbance, predation and climate change.

Due to the changes suffered by farming practices during the second half of the 20th century, the populations of steppe birds suffered a drastic decrease, having vanished from several countries or occurring only in very restricted areas.

The Portuguese populations of these species were no exception. Due to the disappearance of extensive dry farming systems in which cereal crops rotating with fallow lands and pastures were replaced by intensive irrigated crops, olive plantations, vineyards or forest, the Portuguese populations of these three species are now almost restricted to a few areas in the Alentejo region. Furthermore the main breeding grounds are restricted to the Castro Verde Special Protection Area (SPA), where more than 80% of the Great Bustard population, 70% of the Lesser Kestrel population and 50% of the Little Bustard population occur.

Project LIFE Estepárias aims to minimize some of the threats to the conservation of the Great Bustard, Little Bustard and Lesser Kestrel in 4 Baixo Alentejo SPAs with pseudo-steppe habitat, in order to ensure the long-term conservation of these species and contribute for the management of Natura 2000.

Project objectives

The main objectives of this project are:

- to protect the most important breeding areas for the Great Bustard;
- to improve breeding success and productivity of target species through habitat management, elimination of disturbance factors and recovery of injured individuals;
- to promote the re-establishment of the Lesser Kestrel in the Mourão/Moura/Barrancos SPA;
- to specialize the Wild Animal Reception and Recovery Center (CARAS) of the LPN-Alentejo, in Évora, in the treatment and recovery of steppe birds;

- to encourage and advise farmers to participate in agro-environment schemes that promote the maintenance of the extensive cereal dry farming systems;
- to minimize the impact of power lines on target species;
- to define mitigation measures for reducing the impact of global climate changes on target species;
- to raise awareness and improve the dissemination of information about best management practices to benefit the habitat of the target species.

This project aims towards a close cooperation with farmers, landowners, game managers and other intervenients in order to get them involved in the efforts for the conservation of these species. This way, it will be possible to develop and disseminate good practices, promoting team work and mutual learning.

Coordinating beneficiary: LPN - Liga para a Protecção da Natureza

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